

Robert Pirie, 80, Lawyer and Banker in Mergers and Takeovers, Dies

Photo



Robert S Pirie in 1982. Credit Vic DeLucia/The New York Times

Robert S Pirie, a combative corporate lawyer when the risky but lucrative field of mergers and acquisitions was emerging and later a prominent investment banker on Wall Street, died on Jan. 15 in Manhattan. He was 80.

His death, at NewYork-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center, followed a stroke, his son, John, said.

A Harvard-educated bibliophile, Mr. Pirie was also active in Democratic politics and maintained a large and widely noted library of thousands of books, many of them rare copies that have been put on exhibition.

He had been involved in mergers and acquisitions while practicing at Gaston, Snow, Motley & Holt in Boston in the early 1970s when he joined forces in a hostile takeover with

Joseph Flom, a founder of the powerful New York firm Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom.

Mr. Flom invited him to join the firm, but Mr. Pirie was reluctant to leave Boston. So Mr. Flom suggested that he become a partner but remain in Boston to open a branch of Skadden, Arps there. To complete the plan, the firm successfully petitioned the Massachusetts Bar Association to overturn a rule that had kept out-of-state firms from establishing local offices under their own name.

With Mr. Flom as a legal mentor, Mr. Pirie developed into an aggressive mergers-and-acquisitions lawyer, spending much of his time in New York. In his book "Skadden: Power, Money, and the Rise of a Legal Empire" (1993), Lincoln Caplan described Mr. Pirie as "an iconoclast."

Mr. Caplan wrote: “A lawyer who worked with him said, ‘He bulls his way through everything in a larger-than-life way, and he knows he’s doing it. He affects a kind of entitlement, with a confidence and a flair that enable him to pull it off.’ ”

Mr. Pirie was a partner at the firm from 1973 until 1982, when he was named president and chief executive of Rothschild Inc., the New York investment banking arm of the Rothschild family. Among [the deals](#) he was involved in at Rothschild were the media mogul [Robert Maxwell’s takeover](#) of the publishing company Macmillan and [James Goldsmith’s](#) of the paper giant Crown Zellerbach.

“Bob Pirie is a man with green fingers who knows how to make money,” David de Rothschild, head of the Rothschild bank in Paris, said at the time.

Mr. Pirie later became senior managing director of [Bear Stearns](#) & Company and vice chairman of investment banking at SG Cowen Securities. He also advised opponents of the vast expansion plans proposed by New York University’s president, John Sexton, in recent years.

A nephew of Adlai E. Stevenson, the Democratic presidential nominee in 1952 and 1956, Mr. Pirie enlisted as deputy campaign manager for Senator Eugene J. McCarthy’s campaign for president in 1968 and as chief fund-raiser for Senator Harold E. Hughes, Democrat of Iowa, when the senator flirted with a White House bid in 1972. That work earned Mr. Pirie a distinction he cherished: his inclusion on President Richard M. Nixon’s so-called enemies list.

Robert Pirie — the initial “S” appears on his birth certificate although he had no middle name — was born in Chicago on May 8, 1934, a member of the Carson, Pirie, Scott department store family. He was a graduate of the Buckley School in New York, the Hotchkiss School in Connecticut, Harvard College and Harvard Law School.

His marriage to Deirdre Howard ended in divorce in 2000. In addition to his son, he is survived by a daughter, Sophie Clifton; a sister, Joan Leclerc; and four grandchildren. He lived in Manhattan.

Mr. Pirie was drawn to Elizabethan authors as an undergraduate and began collecting books while serving in the Army in Germany in the late 1950s. There, scouring the alleys of old Hanau, he found a rare 17th-century work by John Donne.

His private library grew to include thousands of volumes, which he made available to librarians and scholars. He specialized in 16th- and 17th-century English literature and provided many of the exhibits for the 400th-anniversary Donne exhibition at the

Grolier Club in Manhattan in 1972.

His collection included books from Charles I's library; autographed letters by Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, John Dryden, John Locke and the diarist John Evelyn; Jean-Baptiste Colbert's copy of Sir Thomas More's "Workes"; Shakespeare's Second Folio, bound for the son-in-law of the publisher; one of three known copies of Bacon's "Essays" of 1597; a presentation copy of Ben Jonson's "Workes" to Elizabeth of Bohemia; and a presentation copy of Isaac Newton's "Opticks" to the astronomer Edmond Halley.

Mr. Pirie once said that though he was advised to get a law degree, "I'd never intended to practice law."

"I wanted to become the rare book curator at Harvard," he said.